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## Exposing Study on Secessionism in Indonesia

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to systematically explore literatures on secessionism in Indonesia. The archipelagic country is well known for having a long history of dealing with the problem of secessionism. With the perennial problem of secessionism coupled with ethnic and religious conflicts erupting in many parts of the country, particularly during the 2000s, some observers even wondered whether Indonesia would be able to survive and to maintain its unity. Despite a considerable analysis has been given to the problem, at present, none of works has paid attention to draw a map regarding the landscape of the study. As a result, we know little about the nature of study on secession in Indonesia. This paucity is strange particularly when one considers that an exploration on the issue is important to help observers to find the gap within the recent researches. This paper finds a review of relevant literatures on the topic in general can be summed up into three groups based on their analysis units: secessionist groups, the state, and international community or foreign powers. The first cluster of researches focuses on secessionist movements such as their tactics and strategies as well as organizational structure. The second cluster discusses state's counter-policies against secessionists. The third cluster explores the roles as well as the impacts of external actors or foreign powers in secessionist conflicts.

**Keywords:** Exposing Study; Secessionism; Indonesia

### **Introduction**

Secessionism is one of the important phenomena within international politics. It is estimated that no more than 25 states from 196 members of the United Nations can claim themselves to be free from these boundary-related conflicts (Bookman, 1993). Recent data shows that there have been fifty-two secessionist movements on average per year since 1945 and there are around fifty five active movements as of 2011 (Coggins, 2011; Griffiths, 2015). Most of secessionist conflicts occurs in postcolonial states. According to Freeman (1998) people within postcolonial states will always question the legitimacy of their country because the territory and boundaries were inherited, Not so much different, Indonesia as a postcolonial state has been well known for having a long history of dealing with the problem of secessionism. Some of the secessionist movements within the country have included *Republik Maluku Selatan* (Republic of South Moluccas/RMS) (Chauvel, 2008), *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Aceh Free Movement/GAM) (Morfit, 2007) as well as the very short-lived Bali and Riau peaceful independence movements (Gayatri, 2011). With the perennial problem of secessionism coupled with ethnic and religious

conflicts erupting in many parts of the country, particularly in the beginning of the 2000s, some observers such as Huxley (2002b), Emmerson (2000) as well as Aspinall and Berger (2001) wondered whether Indonesia would be able to survive and to maintain its unity.

Although considerable analysis has been given to the issue, there is a dearth of systematic survey on secessionism researches in Indonesia. Indeed, most of observers have conducted comprehensive investigations and offered rather details explanations on particular secessionist case/s (i.e Aspinall, 2009; Azra, 2002; Singh, 2011). Their writings, however, lack adequate reviews on the topics under study. This paucity is strange particularly when one considers the importance of such efforts to help scholars to find gaps within the existing inquiries. As a result, at present, we know little about the nature of study on secession in Indonesia. This paper aims to systematically draw a landscape of inquiries on secessionism in Indonesia. It finds that researches on secessionism in Indonesia can be categorized into three analysis units; secessionist groups, the state and international powers/actors. The first group concerns on explaining the characters of secessionists, including their internal structure, strategies and motivations. The second cluster focuses on describing state's domestic policies to solve its internal strife. The last cluster examine the extent to which external/international powers are having their influences on particular secessionist conflicts. Consisting of three sections, it begins with an exploration on how the term of secession is defined within this paper. The second section reviews literatures on secession in Indonesia. The last part is a conclusion and it includes some suggestions for further research on the topics.

### *Secession: What is It?*

It is a common practice within Indonesian society to call secessionists with some words; insurgents, separatists and rebels. In the case of Papua conflict for instance, local newspapers and televisions have used the later in their reports regarding West Papua secessionism (i.e Santoso, 2017). The government continued to call the National Liberation Army-West Papua (TPN-PB) as Armed Separatist Movement (GSB) (Bappenas, 2007). During a violent clash between Indonesian authorities and TPN-PB in Tembagapura, West Papua<sup>1</sup> in 2017, the movement was also labelled as Armed Crime Separatist Group (KKSB) together with insurgents and rebels by both the military and the police (Putra, 2017). Likewise, experts on conflicts in Indonesia conflate secessionists with insurgents, rebellions or separatists within their analysis. This tendency can be seen for instance within analysis on secessionist groups of *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) and *Republik Maluku Selatan* (RMS) (i.e Azra, 2002; Huxley, 2002a) as well as West Papua's *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM) (i.e Trajano, 2010). Indeed, as it has been noticed by Aspinall and Berger (2001), public and scholars mostly label any resistances claimed to have aspirations against the state with the term of separatists.

As political phenomena subject to scholarly study, scholars rarely disagree that, in practice and theory, the boundaries between secessionism and separatism are blurred. Wood (1981) identifies that some movements oscillate between separatism and secessionism objectives depending on their leaders conscious strategies or the desire of population within the conflicting territory. Pavkovic and Cabestan (2013, p. 2) succinctly argue that "there is no obstacle for a movement to shift from a merely separatist to secessionist political goals" and vice versa. Some separatists, for example in Catalan and Kashmir, develop in a direction of secessionism by strengthening their demand to remove all powers, including sovereign powers, hold by the central government. On the other hand, some secessionists movements become merely separatists because they stop their activities right before their political objectives achieved, usually by accepting the government's accommodative offer such as an autonomy status. Cases of the later include Tibet and North Ireland.

Albeit these blurred boundaries between the study of secessionism and of separatism, this paper argues that a review the study on secessionism in Indonesia should begin with a discussion on the definition of separatism and, importantly, secessionism. This necessity derives from the fact that with

media, authority and scholarly literature apply the terms of separatist and insurgents to any resistances without further distinction, it is possible to include all claimed as separatists within the discussion of secessionism.

### *Defining Secession*

Separatism is not a contested concept among scholars in term of its definition and scope. Despite its vagueness, there has been no attempts to limit the definition of separatism to the use of specific means (e.g., violent or peaceful) or to a particular territory (Pavkovic & Cabestan, 2013). Observers rather agree that separatism denotes political activities with intention or objective to reduce the central government's control or powers over a particular territory and to transfer that powers or authorities to the population of the territory in question. Wood (1981, p. 110) concisely writes that separatism encompasses "all instances of political alienation which feature a desire for the reduction of control by a central authority in a specific area".

On the other hand, there have been disagreements regarding secession, at least among scholars and legal jurists. Doyle (2010, p. 1) writes that each side involved within secessionist dispute have their own interpretation on what the term entails; while secessionist movements employ the term "to connote peaceful and legitimate withdrawal," parent states use it to depict "treasonous rebellion interfering with the unity of a state". Unfortunately, international legal documents, treaties, or laws that guide the relationships among states, rarely mention the word "secession"<sup>ii</sup> because it has such negative connotations in a state-centered world (De Villiers, 2013; Pavković & Radan, 2011). In his edited book titled *Secession: International Law Perspectives*, Kohen (2006, p. 4) concludes that "it is evidence States are not willing to allow even a potential consideration that secession is a situation governed by international law, even after the success of a secessionist State". The international community "has never accepted and does not accept and I do not believe will ever accept the principle of secession as part of its Member State(s)," argued UN Secretary General U-Thant (United Nations, 1970).

Secession etymologically is a combination of the Latin words *se* (apart) and *cedere* (to go) (*Online Etymological Dictionary*; Radan, 2008). At the time of ancient Rome, it denoted the "temporary migration of plebeians from the city to compel patricians to address their grievances" (*Online Etymological Dictionary*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "the action of seceding or formally withdrawing from an alliance, a federation, a political or religious organization, or the like" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Secession, thus, is synonymous with withdrawal or moving away. Legal and political scholars, however, tend to agree in principle that secession involves the withdrawal of a particular territory including its population from an existing state. Crawford (2006) believes the term is appropriate when parent states deny the withdrawal of a particular territory. He defines secession as "the creation of a state by the use of threat of force without the consent of the former sovereign" (p. 375). Kohen (2006, p. 3) similarly maintains that secession implies "the creation of a new independent entity through the separation of part of the territory and population of an existing State, without the consent of the latter". Nevertheless, there is typically no mention in such legal texts of a specific process for breakaway, leading many scholars to conclude that the parent state's consent as irrelevant to the definition of secession. Radan (2008, p. 18), for instance, argues that secession is simply "the creation of a new state upon territory previously forming part of, or being a colonial entity of, an existing state". Anderson (2012, p. 344) asserts that secession is "the withdrawal of territory (colonial or non-colonial) from part of an existing state to create a new state".

For the purpose of this paper, it adopts a broad definition of secession; the withdrawal of a territory from the jurisdiction of an internationally recognized state to establish a new state. The definition covers three elements within the practice of contemporary international relations regarding secession as it

is suggested by Malanczuk (2002); a territorial withdrawal, the transfer of authority from existing state to a new state and international recognition.

To sum up, it is still possible to distinguish separatism and secessionism albeit the fact they may have blurred boundaries on the basis of their aspirations as to severance of contractual relations. Wood (1981, p. 110) correctly notes in brief that the crucial distinction between them lies upon “their willingness or unwillingness to recognize the sovereignty of the existing political authority”. A secessionist by nature is political movement with a claim not to recognize the existing central government’s control over a particular territory and to fight for achieving the status of independent statehood of the territory in question. On the other hand, separatism has its objective to reduce the political control and other powers hold by the central government over a region and to transfer the control and powers to local population. In this sense, separatists in its original position still recognize the sovereignty of existing state upon the conflicting area. Whether or not they shift to secessionism is matter of practical circumstance: level of support from local population and government’s responses (Pavkovic & Cabestan, 2013).

### *Secession in Indonesia*

A review of the study on secession in Indonesia, arguably, should cover only some groups. Within their explanation on the outbreak of communal conflicts in Indonesia at the end of 1990s, Aspinall and Berger (2001) assert that Indonesia certainly has many cases that fall within the classification of rebellions and separatism. Yet, not all of them deserve to be call secessionists. According to them, RMS, GAM and OPM are the only groups which can be called as secessionists. Other than these groups, they emerged merely with the purpose to fight against a particular regime and were not in the position to demand independence. Indeed, DI, Permesta, as well as PRRI in fact never demanded independence. DI was conducting a military struggle between the 1950s and 1960s to contest Indonesian secular ideology and a regime with the objective of establishing an Indonesian Islamic state (Dijk, 1981). Also, PRRI and *Permesta* emerged in the 1950s to challenge the Indonesian first president of Soekarno due to his authoritarian style of government (Doeppers, 1972). In contrast, the GAM and West Papuan secessionists for instance OPM and KNPB are definitely secessionists in nature. Both of them aspire to achieving independence for a particular territory and its people through military struggle and peaceful activism. In short, Indonesia only has few groups of which can be categorized as secessionists; those are the already disbanded RMS and GAM as well as the still in active West Papua secessionism including OPM and *Komite Nasional Papua Barat* (KNPB).

Thus, by examining relevant analysis on secession in Indonesia, the topic generally can be summed up into three analysis units: secessionist groups, the state, and international community or foreign powers. The first cluster of researches points to secessionist movements; the second cluster explore state’s behavior toward secessionists; and the third cluster describe the roles of foreign powers in secessionist conflicts.

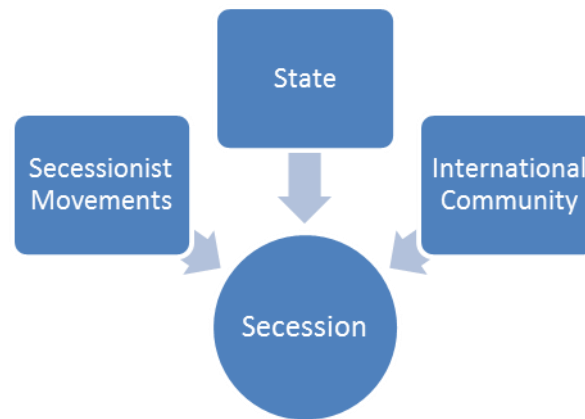


Figure 1: Study on Secessionism in Indonesia

### *Secessionist Movements*

Most of the literature on secessionism in Indonesia pay their attention to secessionist groups. While some focus on secessionists' anatomy, including their ideology and command structure (O. Ondawame, 2010; Schulze, 2004), analyses largely seek to address why these groups emerge and how they sustain. Four sources have been identified as causing the demand of secession to rise, and accordingly, the rise of secessionist movements (Kurniawan, 2018; Sukma, 2004). First, it is argued that secessionism in Indonesia emerge because local people are disappointed with the central government as well as elites in Jakarta who have been accused of excessively exploiting local natural resources and allocating a mere small percentage of taxes and royalties from the extraction back to the local community (Kell, 2010; Webster, 2007). Second, Jakarta's policies to force unity and uniformity on the whole country despite the pluralistic nature of its society also has become another factor that triggered an increasing support for the movements. Among people in Aceh (Kurniawan, 2018) as well as in West Papua (J. O. Ondawame, 2006), such policies are perceived as a threat to local identity.

The third determinant that plays a part in the development of the secessionist movement in Indonesia is the government's unwillingness to provide justice by bringing those who are responsible for gross human rights violations to trial. A large portion of Acehnese and West Papuans, particularly the younger segment of the population, is disappointed and angry with Jakarta's inability to solve most cases of human rights abuses conducted by their security apparatus (2007). As the result, the movements have received tremendous support from the locals in terms of money and other logistical needs to help them to perform their operations. The final cause that contributes to the emergence and the sustainability of secessionism is military repression. Due to severe repressive policies exercised by the military, "any tolerance of Indonesian rule was almost entirely extinguished," according to Barber (2000, p. 36). Establishing a movement, thus, has become a strategy to struggle against the government, and at the same time, to strengthen their demand of separation from the country.

### *International Community/Foreign Powers*

There are few works that offer analysis on international actors involved in secessionist conflict. With regard to the West Papua case, Bilver Singh (2011) dedicates one chapter in his book entitled *Papua: Geopolitics and the Quest for Nationhood* to discuss the internationalization of the West Papua issue. He writes that some leaders of secessionists in exile were undertaking their struggle to bring the quest of West Papua's nationhood to the international stage during the Cold War. Despite their tremendous efforts, most countries were keener to support Indonesia and ignored documents that reported severe human rights abuses happening in the province during this period. However, "the Papuan issue has attracted greater international attention" since the end of the Cold War (Singh, 2011, p. 152).

Meanwhile, May (2011) focuses on describing how small countries in the southwest Pacific regions provide assistance for West Papuan secessionists. He notes that Vanuatu always welcomes West Papuans who seek refugee status in the country and publicly supports West Papuans' aspirations for independence by allowing the pro-independent movement of the National Committee of West Papua to establish headquarters in Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila. Together with Vanuatu, countries such as Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands also regularly raise the issue of West Papuans' right of self-determination during the UN Human Rights annual meeting and encourage the international community to support another referendum to be held in the territory. Zaitchik (2015) provides a personal story of a West Papuan refugee in the US who receives helps in term of funding.

In the case of Aceh, only Aspinall's (2009) book describes in detail how the international community started to pay attention to the problem in the territory. The book extensively exposes the efforts made by Hasan Tiro, the GAM's founding father, and other Acehnese leaders to lobby international actors to give their support for Acehnese cause since 1970s. Yet, the GAM international campaign received only minimal attention from the international community until the Henry Dunant Center (HDC) offered a proposal to mediate in an attempt to solve the conflict in 2000. Hence, international involvement with the Aceh conflict increased with some countries playing an active role in supporting the mediation, such as Finland, Sweden and the US. This series of peaceful negotiations in 2005 resulted in the signing of the Helsinki Peace Agreement between the Indonesian government and the GAM.

### *The State*

Scholarly works that focus on the state mostly examines the Indonesian domestic policies against secessionism. Some analyses concern the government's repressive policies including military operations (Bhakti, Yanuarti, & Nurhasim, 2009; Davies, 2006) and media restriction (Human Right Watch, 2003; Leadbeater, 2008), while others focus on accommodative policies by scrutinizing the implementation of autonomy status to Aceh and West Papua (McGibbon, 2004; Miller, 2008; Musa'ad, 2016). Few scholars examine the process of decision-making behind those policies of repression (Kurniawan, 2018; Sukma, 2004) and accommodation (Sumule, 2003). Analysis on Indonesian counter diplomacy are scarce, yet there have been some scholarly works on the topic. Some analyses describe the events that led up to the Helsinki negotiations and the step by step descriptions of the negotiations themselves (Aspinall, 2005; Aspinall & Crouch, 2003; Merikallio, 2006). By drawing his data from extensive interviews with Indonesian diplomats who were involved in the Helsinki negotiations, Morfit (2007) is able to answer why the Helsinki agreement was finally reached amid some obstacles that occurred during negotiations.

Because the literature on Indonesian counter diplomacy mostly focuses on describing the government's acts, they are still lacking to offer a comprehensive explanation on how such policies arise. It is still a question, for instance, why the fourth Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, finally accepted the offer made by HDC in 2000 to mediate the negotiations between Indonesia and GAM.

### *Conclusion*

Secession is one of important topics within current international relations. By looking at the literature on secessionism in Indonesia, this paper finds that analysis on the topics generally can be categorized onto three unit of analysis; secessionist movements, the state and international community/external powers. Whereas analysis on secessionist groups are abundance, there has been only a few works discuss the involvement of external powers upon secessionist conflicts as well as how Jakarta's responses to external interferences. Most of works within two unit of analysis are rather descriptive with their focus on events or activities conducted by Indonesian diplomats or international

community. Although their narratives are definitely important to the study, they are lacking in analytical explanation.

Further inquiries should be done on the linkage between international community and secessionist conflict as well as Indonesian diplomatic responses on the problem. With regard to the former, some of issues, i.e who international actors involved in a particular conflict, reasons for them to openly or covertly engage in the conflict as well as what type of support they give to the secessionist movements, deserve to get attention from scholars. Questions concerning on what makes the issue of secessionism can be linked to foreign policy making as well as how the dynamics of Indonesian counter diplomacy are some instances of which scholars need to explain.

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<sup>i</sup> For this paper, the term of West Papua encompasses of a territory covering a half part of the island of New Guinea, from the 141<sup>st</sup> meridian to the West.

<sup>ii</sup> The Vienna Convention on Succession of States in respect to treaties use the word “succession” to describes how a new state emerges in international relations. In article 2 it provides that a new independent state is “a successor State the territory of which immediately before the date of the succession of States was a dependent territory for the international relations of which the predecessor State was responsible” (United Nations, 1978). However, the Convention did not differentiate between the cases of breakaway or separation such as secession and those of devolution. The Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States is the only exception in this case of which it proclaims in Article 2(II) “the duty of...State[s] to refrain from the promotion, encouragement or support, direct or indirect, of rebellious or secessionist activities....”(United Nations, 1981)